

Gender-focused Programming for Conflict Mitigation: The CBI Experience



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Macedonia Confidence Building Initiative

Implemented by the International Organization for Migration
Funded by USAID/Office of Transition Initiatives

August 2003

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SUMMARY: Program experience and research demonstrate the importance of women's participation in post-conflict programming aimed at rehabilitation, reconstruction and re-establishing relationships that contribute to preventing future conflict. Still, programming to support women's participation in local and national affairs is often considered of secondary importance relative to programming that directly targets mitigation and management of ethnic, religious and politically motivated conflict. OTI's experience with its Macedonia Confidence Building Initiative (CBI) provides useful examples that demonstrate how programming that specifically targets women contributes to conflict mitigation and management regardless of the cause of the conflict. This paper is presented to share the CBI experience. CBI was implemented by the International Organization for Migration from October 2001 through October 2003 with financial, technical and management support from USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI).

ISSUES: Women in even the most peaceful settings are often the most neglected and marginalized of a country's population, yet women all over the world, often with minimal assistance, are expected to accept the challenge and burden of promoting and building tolerant and productive families and communities. This is a particular challenge for women in countries that have or are currently experiencing conflict.

In many post-conflict settings, the urgency with which programs need to deliver goods and services to affected communities to respond to basic or emergency survival tends to take precedence over such programming considerations as the need to tailor programming to ensure that the needs of all members of a community are, first, adequately represented and, second, responded to in a manner that is equitable. Once any segment of a community is left out of the decision-making process, however, which is often the case with women even as attention is paid to ensuring representation by ethnic, religious and political groups, then a precedent is established that is all too easy to repeat, even as the emergency phase of a conflict ends and there is a shift to programming aimed at restoring confidence that is essential to normalization and lasting peace.

Therefore, there is a need to incorporate gender-sensitive and –targeted programming in conflict mitigation and management programs that is specifically focused on increasing women's participation in community and national affair decision-making.

CHALLENGES FACING GENDER-SENSITIVE AND –TARGETED PROGRAMMING:

- Lack of awareness among program staff and target communities about the importance of gender-focused programming for achieving and sustaining overall program outcomes.
- Lack of training and experience with gender-focused programming among program staff.
- Local traditions and practices that exclude women from public gatherings, professions outside the home, household and community decision-making.
- Lack of commitment to focusing programming on women, even though women comprise the largest “minority” in most conflict settings in terms of program emphases and resources available to them.

A RESPONSE: THE CBI EXPERIENCE:

The CBI Approach to Gender and Rationale

CBI incorporated gender-sensitive and –targeted programming from the beginning of the program cycle and included it in its field-based implementation strategies to ensure follow through. The rationale for this approach was twofold: 1) such programming contributes to mitigation of conflict regardless of its cause, an immediate and medium-term goal, and 2) such programming helps promote and sustain adoption of democratic values and practices, both an immediate and long-term goal.

In the first case, ensuring women participate in decision-making related to community and national affairs is a means to bridge other types of divides (religious, ethnic, political) in which women's roles in conflict mitigation remain under-explored and supported. Women, who are strongly motivated by family concerns, are often more receptive to bridging traditional divides if mitigating conflict will contribute to a stable and secure environment for their families, especially their children.

In terms of promoting democratic values and practices, participation and representative decision-making are fundamental. Encouraging women's participation through public meetings, voting in local and national elections, seeking and obtaining representative office, whether in the private or public sector, are some examples of how CBI has supported women's active participation in directing their country's future. Such support can contribute to changing the traditional male-dominated power dynamics that are often a key cause of or contributing factor to conflicts starting and being sustained.

CBI employed a variety of program approaches to promote women's increased participation in Macedonian society. These included:

- Supporting special events, such as International Women's Day, to promote awareness of women as essential contributors to Macedonia's economic, political and social well-being.
- Mobilizing women's participation in community meetings where community needs were discussed and prioritized. Often, this meant providing women with opportunities to first meet separately from men to enable them to articulate their own priorities before joining in larger community meetings.
- Supporting women's organizations, associations and coalitions to carry out a variety of activities.
- Promoting moderate women leaders in a variety of professions (media, civil society, politics, economic development, health).
- Supported local level implementation of national legislation mandating gender-mainstreaming.
- Participating in donors' group discussions and other forums to share experiences regarding gender programming.

Out of a total of 490 grants, 65 (13%) specifically targeted women to promote their increased capacity and participation in decision-making.

Positive Experiences Promoting Women's Participation in Confidence Building Initiatives

Following are a selection of gender-sensitive and –targeted activities that were supported by CBI:

Women as Peace Builders and Leaders: What began as a grassroots peace march evolved into a political force to be reckoned with. In March 2002, ethnic Albanian, Turkish, Roma, Serb and Macedonian women came together under banners in each language proclaiming “Together We Are Stronger.” They marched down the main street of Bitola, a once peaceful and prosperous city in the southwest that was torn apart by ethnic riots during the conflict.

Buoyed by the success of the OTI-sponsored event, the women's groups formed a regional coalition and spearheaded a large-scale campaign across the southwest to promote the role of women in politics. More than 2,000 women participated in a coordinated effort to ensure that more female candidates stood for election. The campaign contributed to the remarkable results of the September 2002 national elections: the number of female members of Parliament more than doubled, from nine to 21. Commenting on the Network's experiences with CBI support, one member remarked that “CBI shared a hand with us, united us, and showed us a path for coexistence, unity, and tolerance. Now, together, we're stronger in accomplishing our goals for peace, equity, and diversity.”

The Network most recently lobbied successfully for the establishment of nationally mandated Gender Equity Boards in five municipalities in southern Macedonia. The remaining five municipalities are currently passing similar initiatives through their councils, signifying that, as a result of the Network's lobbying efforts, all ten local governments in the region will have established Gender Equity Boards by early September 2003, giving women in the region a permanent stake and voice in local affairs.

Organizing Women Restores Community Capacity and Confidence: For the first time in the history of Radusa village, women have come out in full force to make their voices heard. The traditional village experienced a new way of operating when CBI insisted that women participate in making decisions about community priorities. Radusa is an ethnically and politically divided village of 1,800 inhabitants located near Macedonia's northern border with Kosovo. It suffered extensive infrastructure damage during the 2001 conflict, forcing most residents to leave. CBI's assistance with rebuilding the village and its encouragement of broad participation in the process are helping residents return.



CBI's attempts to bring together all community members to discuss priorities got off to a slow start, with only men participating in meetings. Attempts to include women alongside men in decision-making were initially met with skepticism and fear that doing so might threaten traditional practices. However, CBI continued to emphasize the importance of hearing voices representing all ethnic, religious, political and gender groups to the project's success.

With CBI's support, more than 100 women in the community organized their own meeting – a first ever – to voice concerns and identify priorities for their community. “Since CBI became involved, so many positive things have happened in our village,” said one female teacher at a local elementary school. One of the positive changes is the creation of the first Women's Organization of Radusa.

Women's Rights are Human Rights: In western Macedonia CBI supported the Debar Women's Center, a coalition of ethnic Albanian, Macedonian and Turkish women to educate and engage their communities in discussions about the role of women by communicating the connection between women's rights and human rights. CBI provided support for production of printed materials that were used in this community outreach campaign to point out that the role of women in their part of society is currently at odds with such standards, and to promote positive change.

Women Finding Common Ground: In eastern Macedonia, CBI supported the development and production of a play to combat domestic violence. The play, which was performed in eight municipalities across the country, was developed to show that violence against women is present in all communities in Macedonia—that such violence occurs without respect to cultural, political, or religious differences—and that it is unacceptable. Performances helped to promote dialogue about the issue of violence against women and to contribute to preventing its occurrence.

Coalition Building as a Confidence Building Measure: CBI collaborated with the OSCE to support the Tetovo Women's Network to undertake a variety of initiatives, including a street march, lectures and discussion on topical women's issues with prominent community leaders. The Network of nine NGOs was established in 2002 with assistance from CBI and OSCE to help women's NGOs and informal groups form a coalition to prioritize and collectively address women's needs in an area hardest hit by the conflict of 2001.

In addition to mitigating conflict by lessening tensions in targeted communities and encouraging adoption of democratic values and practices, CBI's gender-focused programming successfully addressed a range of issues identified by women as important to their own well-being and that of their families and communities. These issues included:

- economic development,
- employment and income generation,
- women access to and involvement in local and national media,
- women's health,
- education,
- political participation,
- human rights,
- social development, and
- sports.

CONCLUSIONS:

CBI's active support for women's involvement at all levels of decision-making in Macedonia has advanced CBI's objective of giving all community members a voice and the power to bring about positive changes. The CBI experience has also provided lessons about how gender-focused programming can be approached and that it can have an impact beyond the immediate project outcomes in terms of supporting women's rights and responsibilities in a democratic society.

In summary:

- Gender-sensitive and –targeted programming should be a part of the overall program strategy from the beginning of a program, and resources should be made available for grants or projects that focus specifically on promoting women's rights and responsibilities in society.

- Once gender is incorporated into a program strategy, there is a need to identify and employ specific indicators and other measures to track the gender-sensitive and –targeted programming is being carried out and that it is having an impact.
- This should be followed with orientation and training for field staff on gender-sensitive and –targeted programming.
- Women’s initiative and participation in grant development, decision making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, regardless of the type of grant, should be required for all grant activity.
- Follow-up financial, material and moral support should be provided for women groups and women-led initiatives that demonstrate a contribution to achieving other program objectives (ethnic, religious and political, cohesion; conflict resolution; etc.) to further encourage women’s participation and acceptance of their participation in decision-making and program implementation. This type of support helps to develop positive role models.
- In a similar manner, moderate female leaders should be promoted and supported at community and national levels.
- In the same way that programs report on activities that aim to mitigate political, ethnic and religious conflict, programs should be required to report out on the use of gender-sensitive and –targeted programming on the actual mitigation of conflict.